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Alum Astronaut Phones From International Space Station

Monday, April 16, 2007

by Mass Communications Specialist Senior Chief Jacqueline Kiel



For the second time inside of a year, students, faculty, staff and some family members at the Naval Postgraduate School were honored to participate in a video-teleconference with a member of the International Space Station (ISS) crew.

More than 30 people crammed into the president's conference room at NPS to speak with NPS alum and Navy Capt. Michael E. Lopez-Alegria, known as Mike L-A, NASA astronaut and current commander of Expedition-14 aboard ISS. He arrived at the space station Sept. 20, 2006 and returns to earth April 20, 2007.

The opportunity to participate in such a significant event was coordinated by NASA visiting professor Dr. Jim Newman, and Rudolf Panholzer, chair of the Space Systems Academic Group.

On behalf of the president, provost, faculty and staff, Graduate School of Engineering and Applied Sciences Dean Jim Kays offered a hearty welcome and hello to Capt. Lopez-Alegria: "We all congratulate you on the success of your mission and we thank you for what you're doing," he said.

With what proved to be characteristic humor, L-A answered with, "I'm not used to addressing such an august group. I don't think I've seen so many people wearing neckties since we've been up here."

Wearing a blue t-shirt, L-A was dressed in what he calls "the official parade uniform of the international space station."

L-A just broke the U.S. endurance record for time in space, which was originally co-held by retired Navy Captain and astronaut Dan Bursch, now an NPS professor, who held the record for almost 5 years. "Congratulations on your record," Bursh said. "I went out and got a haircut, call it a record hair cut."

To which L-A replied with aplomb, "you probably won't have to get another haircut before my record's broken, but thanks for the effort."

The next record breaker will be Astronaut Sunita L. Williams, who arrived on board the space station in December and will go home sometime in July or August. "Which is why I made the reference to my endurance record being broken shortly," L-A explained, since he will be coming home on a Soyuz later this week.

L-A told the group it was a privilege to be able to speak with them, saying, "There are more graduates from [NPS] that are, or have been, in the astronaut corps than from any other institution in the country, and I think that's pretty telling and pretty important."

The attentive audience was treated to an explanation of the various modules. L-A talked about where science is done and where they eat and sleep. He also spoke about the latest construction phase, telling of the newest modules that will be added over the next year or so.

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Several children were in the audience. They asked some of the most interesting questions resulting in quite unexpected and sometime humorous answers from L-A.

Schedules aboard the spaces station were the subject of one question. L-A explained what happens in a regular 24-hour period saying, “Very little is at our discretion during the work week.”

During a regular day they are allotted eight-and-a-half hours for sleep, though most of them don’t use all of it. They then have one-and-a-half hours of post-sleep time for personal hygiene, breakfast and perhaps some email. There is one hour for lunch and then two hours prior to the next sleep period in which they will eat dinner and have a bit of personal time. They do get a break on the weekends. Half of Saturday and all of Sunday is considered personal time. The rest of the time is considered work time.

Regardless of the day, working out is a must. “Everyday we have two-and-a-half hours set aside for exercise and that’s pretty important for us for when we return,” L-A explained. “We have a tendency to lose muscle mass and bone density and our activities, which are divided between cardiovascular and resistive training are designed to help mitigate that. So we spend a lot of time working out. For some people that’s great, but for some it’s kind of a drag.”

One young boy asked L-A to toss something in the air so he could see what it would look like. “I’ll toss myself,” L-A said lightheartedly. He did a perfect somersault in front of the camera and then proceeded to show off what he called “some pretty unusual clothes, a high-tech / low-tech gravity suit.” The special pants are used to keep the blood from pooling in lower extremities. He explained that it is all in preparation for reentry.

Lopez-Alegria went further, demonstrating how liquid reacts in space. “Eating and drinking are fun up here as you can imagine, and it never gets boring.” He then tossed a chocolate covered espresso bean. “The hard part is you have to chase down everything you let escape,” he remarked, while going after the wayward bean.

L-A also talked about playing on the space station. “We all have various toys we play with,” he said. “We were doing some maintenance and behind a panel we found a little nerf ball dart gun. I don’t know if it was here when you were here Dan,” he said, speaking to Bursch.

He went on to say, “You could theoretically shoot a dart from one end of the station to the other, but nobody’s been successful in doing that because the hole they have to shoot through is pretty small, but it is a fun challenge.”

Maurice Weir (photo at right), a retired NPS mathematics professor had L-A as a student at NPS. While L-A remembers one of Weir’s courses had been particularly difficult, Weir called L-A one of the best students he every had, to which L-A replied with wit, “I can now say for certain that you don’t remember me at all.”

Ten-year-old Nathan asked, “How do you take a shower if there’s no gravity?”

Because of the lack of gravity and no way to drain water, showers simply aren’t available. “We take a wetted towel and soap and sponge off,” L-A explained. “It turns out you don’t get very dirty here. We stay quite clean.”

“Can you see the asteroid belt from the space station?” asked nine-year-old Julianne.

Because of the orientation of the space station, all the windows face the Earth. L-A explained that the only way to see outward was to be on a space walk, and that it needs to be at a time when the space station is behind Earth, opposite from the sun and thus dark.

We don’t have light pollution to deal with so when we look at the sky at night, we can see things that you can’t see so well with the naked eye from Earth,” he said. “You can really see some amazing amounts of celestial bodies, so much so, that instead of it looking like a black background with white dots, it almost looks like a white background with black dots. I don’t know that you can see the asteroid belt. You can certainly see the Milky Way. It’s very, very clear.”

The 15 minutes allotted for this special long-distance video phone call actually ended up lasting 26 minutes, to the delight of all involved.

“Oh wow, what a treat,” Weir gushed after the VTC. “It was just fantastic being able to communicate with



astronauts as they circle the globe every 90 minutes. I was awed. He was a wonderful student... gifted, and that's clear from his success."

"It's a privilege to be up here," L-A told the group. "I can't think of any other way to spend my so-called work day."

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